

Portfolio Development: An Introduction

By Erlyn Baak

There is a wide body of theoretical research proposing the use of portfolios in ESL composition classes. The purpose of this article is to describe how I have applied existing theoretical research at the practical level in the intermediate/advanced composition classes from teaching experiences in both the U.S. and Mexico. I believe teachers should consider portfolio development in their composition classes because portfolios can measure the growth of students' abilities as writers, promote ownership of students' own writing, and, along with a scoring rubric, provide a mechanism by which students can assess their own strengths and weaknesses as writers.

It is important for the reader to note that the following description of the process of portfolio development is one that has worked for me at the levels I have taught. This may not apply directly to other contexts; however, an important characteristic of portfolio development is its "adaptability" to other levels and contexts. According to Hamp-Lyons, a proponent of portfolio development, "Multiple trait instruments are grounded in the context in which they are used, and they are therefore developed onsite for a specific purpose with a specific group of writers..." (p. 10). With this in mind, ESL composition teachers at the beginning, intermediate, or high advanced levels should seek to modify the following processes to accomplish their own specific goals.

In describing my experience with portfolio development, I would like to start with the end product, the portfolios themselves. I will describe the essays that I require in the completed portfolios, the rationale for each essay, and, finally, the arrangement of the essays within the portfolio. Then, I will show the process—including outline, rough draft(s), peer comments, and revision(s)—by which students develop their portfolios.

Portfolio Description

The first requirement of the teacher is to decide which essays should be included in the portfolio. Of the seven essays that my intermediate students write throughout the semester, I require that four be included in students' portfolios. The first required writing for the portfolio is a timed, impromptu essay written on the first day of class from a list of five prompts. The rationale for requiring a timed impromptu essay written on the first day is to enable the student and reader to see a foundation upon which writing in the class begins. In addition, students and readers can compare impromptu essay writing on the first day of class with a timed essay written on the last day of class. Beyond that, both these timed, in-class essays can be compared to compositions that have gone through multiple drafts and revisions.

Impromptu topics that I have used are presented to the students on the first day of class, with the following instructions:

Topics for Impromptu Essay *Time: 45 minutes* Directions: Choose one of the following topics to write a well-developed essay (i.e., introduction, supporting examples, details, and conclusion). 1. Environmental issues are serious concerns in the world today. Choose an issue (for example, air pollution, accumulation of garbage, overpopulation, use of resources), and discuss this issue (its causes, effects, and possible solutions). 2. Describe what you think would be most important for a foreigner to know about your country and why you chose that topic. 3. All of us have special people in our lives who have influenced us. Pick someone from your life and tell how that person has influenced you and how that has changed you. 4. Explain why you have decided to go to college and what difference you expect it to make in your life. 5. After some sixteen years of schooling, you are likely to have had some good teachers. In your view, what are the characteristics of a good teacher?

The rationale for providing students with a choice of topics and genres is to engage the student in a subject of interest to him/her. Forty-five minutes should be enough time for students to think briefly about each topic before choosing the one they can develop best.

The second required essay for the portfolio is a timed essay written on the last day of class. This essay also serves as a cover letter introducing the portfolio and the compositions in it to the portfolio reader. An example of the format for the in-class final essay follows.

The rationale for the self-reflective format of the cover letter is to encourage the students to demonstrate the degree to which they have become conscious of their own writing strengths and weaknesses. The rationale for allowing forty-five minutes is to provide adequate time for students to consider and provide reasons for each of the four writing samples they have chosen for their portfolios. In addition, it is the same amount of time that was provided for the impromptu essay written on the first day of class, making the comparison between the timed essays written on the first and last day of classes more valid.

IN-CLASS, FINAL ESSAY *Time: 45 minutes* It has been said that, "My portfolio shows who I am." In an organized essay, describe how your portfolio shows who you are. In addition to explaining why you have chosen each of the compositions that are included in your portfolio, you should also comment about the strengths and weaknesses of each piece. This essay, written at the end of the semester, will serve as a cover letter to your portfolio. Thus, it will be the first item that the reader of your portfolio reads. This essay should provide you with an opportunity to introduce both yourself and your portfolio to the reader.

Finally, two more essays (student's choice of topics) of the five untimed essays that students write throughout the semester are required for the completed portfolios, one of which must include the original outline, rough draft, peer comments, revision(s), and final copy which show the process by which the composition is completed. All drafts, peer comments, and revisions reflect the process by which writing is taught in class, and also permit students to choose their best representation of the writing process and product.

As the arrangement of the four essays within the completed portfolio is also important, especially for assessment, I provide the following illustration so students clearly understand how the compositions should be arranged.

1. Cover letter 2. Best Essay 3. Second Best Essay 4. First, In-Class Essay

Note, first, that when the reader opens the completed portfolio, the cover letter written on the last day of class is on the left. On the right, there are three essays: On top is the best essay, and beneath that is the next best essay. One of the three must include the original outline, rough draft,

and peer comments leading up to the final copy. Finally, at the bottom is the essay written on the first day of class. This consistent arrangement of essays within portfolios not only provides the reader with a clearer understanding of the compositions, but also requires students to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of all their compositions to determine their best writing.

Process

One of the greatest weaknesses of ESL student compositions, according to most university English professors, is organization. Thus, I encourage students to develop the necessary skills to write compositions utilizing the following organizational genres: giving instructions, cause and effect, comparison/contrast, classification, and persuasion. Choosing their topic and developing clear organization are skills that are defined as “global” skills, and within this teaching/learning process, students develop the knowledge to discuss the *introduction, body, conclusion, main idea, and supporting details* of an essay. Then, descending from the global level to the “local” level, students also learn and develop the language to discuss the following grammatical items: *simple, compound, and complex sentences, adjective clauses, appositives, coordinators, subordinators, transitions, subject/verb agreement*, as well as the *verb tenses*. I believe that students who can discuss these aspects of their compositions at the metacognitive level have learned a great deal: They have developed the capacity to become active, critical participants in their own learning process.

Except for the in-class essays written on the first and last day of class, all essays written throughout the semester must be accompanied by (1) the original outline, (2) rough drafts, (3) peer comments, and (4) revision(s) leading to the final copy. The first requirement is to organize and present the content of the essays in “outline” form. Although I do not require perfectly detailed outlines, I do require that students begin to organize the logical progression and development of their thesis/genre. Class time is provided for students to discuss their topics and outlines with other students, usually in groups of four. Next, students must write rough drafts of their compositions, which they also discuss in groups of four. For these discussions, I provide the following “Peer Questionnaire” in which students respond to another student’s essay (The lines for students’ answers are omitted.)

Essay Title:

Date:

Essay Author:

Reviewer:

1. What did you like best about this essay?

2. INTRODUCTION: Does the organization of the essay enable you to state its main idea in a single sentence? What is the main idea, and where is it stated? Is it clearly stated? If the main idea is not obvious, what can be done to make it more clear?

3. BODY: What are the major points to support

the main idea? Are they clearly stated? List them.

4. Do all the major points have supporting details? Can you think of additional supporting details that may have been overlooked?

5. Are the transitions clear? List them.

6. Analyze the sentences in the essay. Are they mostly simple, compound, or complex? Are the sentences clear and concise? Are they punctuated correctly?

7. CONCLUSION: How does the conclusion summarize the main idea of the essay? What impression does it leave with the reader?

Finally, to arrive at the final copy, which they submit for assessment, students revise and edit their rough drafts incorporating peer suggestions. The instrument that I use for assessing student essays in my classes is a modification of the “ESL Composition Profile” used by Janet Hughey, et al., described in their book, *Teaching ESL Composition*. The modified version that I use is attached separately. From this, one can see the different values given to different aspects of the composition: content (25 points), organization (20 points), sentence construction (20 points), vocabulary (20 points), and mechanics+proofreading = finished form (15 points). The modification of the original “ESL Composition Profile” described by Hughey was done to align assessment with what is actually taught and learned within the classroom; thus, the assessment of the students’ essay writing becomes more meaningful. Essays are assessed and returned to the students unedited, and many students, at first, ask for “correction” of their mistakes. I resist correcting local errors, however, until the global aspects of their essays are very good to excellent, that is, both content and organization are more global than sentence construction, and sentence construction is more global than article or preposition errors or mechanics such as spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. I believe it makes little sense to “correct” local errors while there are glaring global errors. At the same time, I am always happy to discuss local errors individually after class or during office hours, and the students who clearly want to master all aspects of writing take advantage of this opportunity.

The final stage of portfolio development occurs on or near the last day, reserving the last day for students to examine one another’s portfolios. On this day, which is highly anticipated, students bring all the compositions they have written throughout the semester to class, write their final, in-class essays, and hand in their portfolios. They are not given the final prompt until the class begins. It is always necessary to explain to the students that only *four* essays are required, and no more. The four essays, again, are the two essays written in class on the first and last day; the other two required essays are their best two, one of which must contain the original outline, rough draft, peer comments, and revision(s). Unless the teacher makes these requirements very clear, students will invariably want to include *all* their essays, which eliminates their obligation to choose. After the illustration of the arrangement of essays within the portfolio is provided, students are given the final prompt, and they write their essays.

When the portfolios are turned in, they are given a holistic, summative score; thus, portfolios and the compositions in them are scored on two levels. First, each composition is assessed individually according to the *ESL Composition Profile* discussed previously. Second, the

portfolio as a whole is assessed holistically by its overall impression including diversity, originality, and self-confidence.

Results

The two common themes that run throughout almost all final, in-class essays are that of student ownership and self-assessment, which is consistent with other advocates of portfolio development who say that portfolio development “puts the ball in the student’s court [wherein they become] active, thoughtful participants in the analysis of their own learning” (Murphy and Smith 1992:58). Some examples of student ownership and self-assessment from my high-intermediate students’ final, in-class essays are as follows:

First, students can describe their writing strengths and weaknesses at the metacognitive level, and they reflect on this aspect of their writing in several ways. Examples of students’ describing their weaknesses mechanically are as follows:

“My weakest point is the vocabulary.”
“I need to use more complex sentences, definitely.”
“Many errors occurred, such as pronouns and articles.”

Some students describe their writing as an opportunity to write about what they know, including oneself. Examples of student ownership are as follows:

“I wrote about this topic because I know a lot about it.”
“This is the essay which I liked most because there are things and facts that I learned and realized from my prior working experience.”
“To write this essay I had to analyze myself, and I found out there were still some weaknesses in my personality.

Other students refer to the reader:

“I have to think about readers more.”
“I tried to collect my information from several sources and books to give the reader complete information and make it clear.”

Some students, finally, describe their improvement in writing as “growth.” One student described her improvement as “one more step in understanding English.” And another student compared each essay to different stages of his being: He began with the “infant” stage of the first essay about which he said, “My brain is empty and is waiting to be filled with knowledge,” to the “baby” stage where “content and organization are im-proved,” to the “teenager” stage about which he said, “My brain is filled with knowledge. That is what I gained from this class.” He concluded his final, in-class essay with this observation: “Finally, people grow up day after day. If the time is gone, then we will not catch it again. So we must never stop learning.”

That we “never stop learning” is good advice. I believe that both teachers and students who embark on a program of portfolio development within their composition classes will learn a lot. First, by comparing the first and last in-class essays, both students and teachers will see measurable progress, and they will learn that writing classes count. Second, by examining the character of successive essays throughout the semester, both students and teachers will see heightening degrees of student ownership, and they will learn that students have something to say. Finally, by examining the final, in-class essays, both students and teachers will see a development among students for self analysis, and they will learn that students have developed the critical capacity to learn and to think. These are compelling reasons to use portfolio development within the English composition classroom.

ESL Composition Profile

Student: _____
Date: _____
Topic: _____
Score: _____
Level: _____
Criteria: _____

CONTENT

- 25- EXCELLENT TO VERY GOOD: knowledgeable
22 substantive thorough development of thesis/genre
relevant to assigned topic
- 21- GOOD TO AVERAGE: some knowledge of subject
18 adequate range limited development of thesis/genre
mostly relevant to topic,
- 17- FAIR TO POOR: limited knowledge of subject little
11 substance inadequate development of thesis/genre
- 5- VERY POOR: does not show knowledge of subject
Oct non-substantive not pertinent OR not enough to
evaluate OR no relation to assigned thesis/genre

ORGANIZATION

- 20- EXCELLENT TO VERY GOOD: fluent expression
18 ideas clearly stated/supported well-organized and
very thorough development of introduction, body, and
conclusion well-organized and very thorough
development of supporting details
- 17- GOOD TO AVERAGE: somewhat choppy main ideas
14 stand out, but organization unclear limited
development of introduction, body, and/or conclusion
and/or limited development of supporting details
- 13- FAIR TO POOR: ideas confused or disconnected
10 lacks logical sequencing and development of
introduction, body, and/or conclusion inadequate
development of supporting details
- 7- VERY POOR: does not communicate no organization

Sep OR not enough to evaluate

SENTENCE CONSTRUCTION

- 20- EXCELLENT TO VERY GOOD: effective use of
18 simple, compound, and complex sentences (correctly
punctuated) effective use of coordinators,
subordinators, and transitions few errors of S-V
agreement, verb tense, number, word order/function,
articles, pronouns, prepositions
- 17- GOOD TO AVERAGE: effective simple sentences
14 minor problems in compound and complex sentences
minor problems in the use of coordinators,
subordinators, and transitions several errors of S-V
agreement, verb tense, number, word order/function,
articles, pronouns, prepositions but meaning seldom
obscured
- 13- FAIR TO POOR: major problems in simple,
10 compound, and complex sentences frequent errors of
negation, agreement, tense, number, word
order/function, articles, pronouns, prepositions and/or
fragments, run-ons meaning confused or obscured
- 7- VERY POOR: virtually no mastery of sentence
Sep construction rules dominated by errors does not
communicate OR not enough to evaluate

VOCABULARY

- 20- EXCELLENT TO VERY GOOD: sophisticated range
18 effective word/idiom choice and usage word form
mastery appropriate register
- 17- GOOD TO AVERAGE: adequate range occasional
14 errors of word/idiom form, choice, usage but meaning
not obscured
- 13- FAIR TO POOR: limited range frequent errors of
10 word/idiom form, choice, usage meaning confused or
obscured
- 7- VERY POOR: essentially translation little knowledge
Sep of English vocabulary, idioms, word form OR not
enough to evaluate

MECHANICS + PROOFREADING = FINISHED FORM

- 15- EXCELLENT TO VERY GOOD: demonstrates
13 mastery of conventions few errors of spelling,
punctuation, capitalization includes clearly defined
paragraphs and title page computerized, double-
spaced, appropriately sized margins and type font,
paper stapled
- 10- GOOD TO AVERAGE: occasional errors of spelling,
Dec punctuation, capitalization, unclear paragraphing (no
use of computer or spell check) but meaning not
obscured
- 6- FAIR TO POOR: frequent errors of spelling,
Sep punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing poor
handwriting meaning confused or obscured
- 3- VERY POOR: no mastery of conventions dominated

May by errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization,
paragraphing handwriting illegible OR not enough to
evaluate

TOTAL SCORE:_____

READER

COMMENTS:_____

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